14-year-old physics whizz from India gets into NTU on 2nd attempt

By Jane Ng

NANYANG Technological University's youngest undergraduate, 14-year-old Sunku Sai Swaroop, is at least five years younger than his classmates.

The teen from Andhra Pradesh in India declared: "I like physics. I don't think there's anything else I want to study."

Now a freshman in NTU's school of physical and mathematical sciences, he was accepted on the strength of his A-level results and an interview.

He did his A levels in Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics at Sayfol International School in Kuala Lumpur, and bagged As in Maths and Chemistry and a B in Physics.

These grades come two years after he aced Physics and Maths at O level.

He got into NTU on his second attempt. He first applied last year but was unsuccessful.

Professor Alfred Huan, who heads the division of physics and applied physics, who interviewed him then, said the school was concerned about how he would cope as he was just 13.

But he tried again this year, and was accepted.

The son of a civil engineer and a housewife, Sai chose NTU because he was impressed by his chosen course's curriculum structure and the fact that it was a direct honours course, which means he will graduate with an honours degree if he gets good grades.

In a phone interview from India, his father, Mr Sunku Balaji Ramesh, 45, said: "I'm not pushing him into a fast-track course.

"Since he is able to do it, I have to allow him to further his studies. Age is just a figure."

Because of Sai's age, Prof Huan acts as his mentor - helping him through difficulties in subjects, and giving emotional support if needed.

They meet every Friday for about an hour.

Said Prof Huan: "He is doing very well. He's not afraid to speak up and has no problems with term tests."

He added that NTU's aim was to give the teenager a good degree, which would lay the foundation for future research he may do.

"He may be ahead of his time, but it doesn't mean he's going to be an Einstein."

Indeed, like a typical undergraduate, Sai grumbles about frustrating moments: "I don't like laboratory lessons. I rarely get correct results."

With his dad and mum in India, he lives with their friends in Yishun.

His classmates know his age - even if they sometimes forget it, because at 1.74m, he is as tall as them.

"They tease me good-naturedly and call me a super-genius, but I always tell them I'm not," he said.

When asked how he felt studying in a university at his age, he replied: "I feel great sometimes, and just okay mostly."